

CHAPTER XXXI

MAKING CONVERSATION EFFECTIVE

In conversation avoid the extremes of forwardness and reserve.

—CATO.

Conversation is the laboratory and workshop of the student.

—EMERSON, *Essays: Circles*.

The father of W. E. Gladstone considered conversation to be both an art and an accomplishment. Around the dinner table in his home some topic of local or national interest, or some debated question, was constantly being discussed. In this way a friendly rivalry for supremacy in conversation arose among the family, and an incident observed in the street, an idea gleaned from a book, a deduction from personal experience, was carefully stored as material for the family exchange. Thus his early years of practise in elegant conversation prepared the younger Gladstone for his career as a leader and speaker.

There is a sense in which the ability to converse effectively is efficient public speaking, for our conversation is often heard by many, and occasionally decisions of great moment hinge upon the tone and quality of what we say in private.

Indeed, conversation in the aggregate probably wields more power than press and platform combined. Socrates taught his great truths, not from public rostrums, but in personal converse. Men made pilgrimages to Goethe's library and Coleridge's home to be charmed and instructed by their speech, and the culture of many nations was immeasurably influenced by the thoughts that streamed out from those rich well-springs.

Most of the world-moving speeches are made in the course of conversation. Conferences of diplomats, business-getting arguments,

decisions by boards of directors, considerations of corporate policy, all of which influence the political, mercantile and economic maps of the world, are usually the results of careful though informal conversation, and the man whose opinions weigh in such crises is he who has first carefully pondered the words of both antagonist and protagonist.

However important it may be to attain self-control in light social converse, or about the family table, it is undeniably vital to have oneself perfectly in hand while taking part in a momentous conference. Then the hints that we have given on poise, alertness, precision of word, clearness of statement, and force of utterance, with respect to public speech, are equally applicable to conversation.

The form of nervous egotism—for it is both—that suddenly ends in flusters just when the vital words need to be uttered, is the sign of coming defeat, for a conversation is often a contest. If you feel this tendency embarrassing you, be sure to listen to Holmes's advice:

And when you stick on conversational burs,
Don't strew your pathway with those dreadful *urs*.

Here bring your will into action, for your trouble is a wandering attention. You must *force* your mind to persist along the chosen line of conversation and resolutely refuse to be diverted by *any* subject or happening that may unexpectedly pop up to distract you. To fail here is to lose effectiveness utterly.

Concentration is the keynote of conversational charm and efficiency. The haphazard habit of expression that uses bird-shot when a bullet is needed insures missing the game, for diplomacy of all sorts rests upon the precise application of precise words, particularly—if one may paraphrase Tallyrand—in those crises when language is no longer used to conceal thought.

We may frequently gain new light on old subjects by looking at word-derivations. Conversation signifies in the original a turn-about exchange of

ideas, yet most people seem to regard it as a monologue. Bronson Alcott used to say that many could argue, but few converse. The first thing to remember in conversation, then, is that listening—respectful, sympathetic, alert listening—is not only due to our fellow converser but due to ourselves. Many a reply loses its point because the speaker is so much interested in what he is about to say that it is really no reply at all but merely an irritating and humiliating irrelevancy.

Self-expression is exhilarating. This explains the eternal impulse to decorate totem poles and paint pictures, write poetry and expound philosophy. One of the chief delights of conversation is the opportunity it affords for self-expression. A good conversationalist who monopolizes all the conversation, will be voted a bore because he denies others the enjoyment of self-expression, while a mediocre talker who listens interestedly may be considered a good conversationalist because he permits his companions to please themselves through self-expression. They are praised who please: they please who listen well.

The first step in remedying habits of confusion in manner, awkward bearing, vagueness in thought, and lack of precision in utterance, is to recognize your faults. If you are serenely unconscious of them, no one—least of all yourself—can help you. But once diagnose your own weaknesses, and you can overcome them by doing four things:

1. *WILL* to overcome them, and keep on willing.
2. Hold yourself in hand by assuring yourself that you know precisely what you ought to say. If you cannot do that, be quiet until you are clear on this vital point.
3. Having thus assured yourself, cast out the fear of those who listen to you—they are only human and will respect your words if you really have something to say and say it briefly, simply, and clearly.
4. Have the courage to study the English language until you are master of at least its simpler forms.

Conversational Hints

Choose some subject that will prove of general interest to the whole group. Do not explain the mechanism of a gas engine at an afternoon tea or the culture of hollyhocks at a stag party.

It is not considered good taste for a man to bare his arm in public and show scars or deformities. It is equally bad form for him to flaunt his own woes, or the deformity of some one else's character. The public demands plays and stories that end happily. All the world is seeking happiness. They cannot long be interested in your ills and troubles. George Cohan made himself a millionaire before he was thirty by writing cheerful plays. One of his rules is generally applicable to conversation: "Always leave them laughing when you say good bye."

Dynamite the "I" out of your conversation. Not one man in nine hundred and seven can talk about himself without being a bore. The man who can perform that feat can achieve marvels without talking about himself, so the eternal "I" is not permissible even in his talk.

If you habitually build your conversation around your own interests it may prove very tiresome to your listener. He may be thinking of bird dogs or dry fly fishing while you are discussing the fourth dimension, or the merits of a cucumber lotion. The charming conversationalist is prepared to talk in terms of his listener's interest. If his listener spends his spare time investigating Guernsey cattle or agitating social reforms, the discriminating conversationalist shapes his remarks accordingly. Richard Washburn Child says he knows a man of mediocre ability who can charm men much abler than himself when he discusses electric lighting. This same man probably would bore, and be bored, if he were forced to converse about music or Madagascar.

Avoid platitudes and hackneyed phrases. If you meet a friend from Keokuk on State Street or on Pike's Peak, it is not necessary to observe: "How small this world is after all!" This observation was doubtless made

prior to the formation of Pike's Peak. "This old world is getting better every day." "Farmer's wives do not have to work as hard as formerly." "It is not so much the high cost of living as the cost of high living." Such observations as these excite about the same degree of admiration as is drawn out by the appearance of a 1903-model touring car. If you have nothing fresh or interesting you can always remain silent. How would you like to read a newspaper that flashed out in bold headlines "Nice Weather We Are Having," or daily gave columns to the same old material you had been reading week after week?

QUESTIONS AND EXERCISES

1. Give a short speech describing the conversational bore.
2. In a few words give your idea of a charming converser.
3. What qualities of the orator should *not* be used in conversation.
4. Give a short humorous delineation of the conversational "oracle."
5. Give an account of your first day at observing conversation around you.
6. Give an account of one day's effort to improve your own conversation.
7. Give a list of subjects you heard discussed during any recent period you may select.
8. What is meant by "elastic touch" in conversation?
9. Make a list of "Bromides," as Gellett Burgess calls those threadbare expressions which "bore us to extinction"—itself a Bromide.
10. What causes a phrase to become hackneyed?
11. Define the words, (a) trite; (b) solecism; (c) colloquialism; (d) slang; (e) vulgarism; (f) neologism.
12. What constitutes pretentious talk?